

The Heavy World (Upon Your Shoulders)

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Summary: [Semi-onesided M!OC/Gallagher, Probably OOC] Besides weapon maintenance and potion making, the third useful tip that mercenary rookies usually learned was the name of the guy that could get Gallagher to back off for a few days.

1. The Heavy World (Upon Your Shoulders)

****Important A/N:****

I started this way back in 2012, but only picked it back up in Jan/March/April of 2016. It'd been sitting in my hard drive with only one pitiful page for so long, then I got a few ideas here and there and suddenly it became a monstrous 30 page document over the course of a handful of days. Hah.

This features an old original character from a few of my earlier works, and no, I don't remember how or when this particular ship came to me, it just did. As you can probably guess, the cover image is what he looks like now - back when I'd created him, there hadn't been any concept art images of any of the characters' faces, but 6 years later there's plenty of images to photoshop into an actual portrait.

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><p>It was common knowledge that Gallagher was an all-around jerk to anybody that wasn't Captain Aodhan, and even that was stretching the truth. Besides weapon maintenance and potion making, the third useful tip that new mercenaries usually learned was the name of the guy that could get Gallagher to back off for a few days if he was being particularly annoying.

There also was a lesser known fact of that Gallagher cheated (_how, the world may never know_) at any of the drinking games that he

hosted in Rocheste every-so-often.

On one fine day, Gallagher burst into a specific room within the veteran mercenaries' barracks with an obnoxious yell before yanking the blankets off of the half-naked man that had curled into a ball of misery in the center of his too small cot.

"RISE AND SHINE, BITCH!"

He got a pained groan in response. One amber eye blearily opened before tightly shutting back closed as Gallagher threw open the thick curtains to allow in blinding rays of cheerful sunshine into the room.

"Whuâ€¦ fuckâ€¦ my headâ€¦ hurtsâ€¦ ughâ€¦" There was absolutely no remorse as the mercenary dragged the man off of the bed by the ankles, letting him drop into a useless sprawl of limbs on the wooden floor.

Gallagher, with a shit-eating grin on his face, made sure to get real close to the man before yelling into the closest ear, "WAKE UP! You're my slave today, since you couldn't hold your beer last night!"

"Gahlâ€¦ nhggnâ€¦ ssshuâ€¦ uuupâ€¦"

"First things first, you're gonna take over training the rookies today! I've got some pretty ladies to catch and I don't need the Captain breathing down my neck!"

With that, Gallagher booted the hungover man into the communal bathroom before running out of the barracks, cackling like a madman all the way back to the Outpost.

* * *

><p>Roughly half an hour later, Ceara looked up from her papers she had been reading as the door to the Outpost opened. She had a smile on her face, but it fell as she saw the state of the person had entered.<p>

There were dark circles under his tired eyes, visible even through his tanned skin. He moved slowly and cautiously as if every part of his body ached to the bone, and he winced whenever he got too close to a patch of sunlight shining through the windows or if something creaked loudly as he walked over to her.

The usually amicable and cheerful training instructor for dual-wielders looked like death had warmed over him while he slept.

"Are you... alright, Kain?" The man flopped heavily onto the seat on the bench next to her and rested his head between his folded arms.

"â€¦Do I look alright t'you?" Ceara scooted a little to the side. Pissing off a hungover Kain was like throwing a spear into the backside of a White Tyrant. Both were not very good ideas, although the latter would probably illicit _some_ kind of response other than an incoherent gurgle of vowels.

"I heard Gallagher screaming something about having a slave, for a day."

Kain was silent for a while, pressing the palms of his hands into his eye sockets in futile hope that the pressure would help curb the pounding in his skull.

"Apparen'ly, I lost a drinking game last night. I don' remember much."

Ceara grimaced and patted him gently on the back in sympathy. "Ah, well, that explains a lot."

The man slumped down further into his seat and cracked his stiff knuckles. "I hav'ta take over his kids today. The ones that need training with secondary weapons. Spears and mine bombs."

The redhead winced. "Oh."

Kain sighed and then stretched his arms. Wincing at several pops and rubbing his neck, he said, "Yeah, I had the same thought. I'm off to get some hotcakes at the Inn. Y'want some?"

Ceara held up the papers she had been reading. "I've already ate, and I've got to finish these reports. I'll see you later, alright? Don't push yourself too hard, it's just training with the rookies. Bootcamp season will be over soon."

Exiting the Outpost, Kain ran into Ellis.

Well, it was more like Ellis ran face-first into his metal chestplate and Kain stumbled over the scrawny boy. The young Royal Army cadet took one look at him before running away while screaming his head off like a chicken.

Kain sighed and checked the mailbox. He would probably never know why the kid was so scared of him. He'd been reprimanded by Gwynn a few times for scaring the cadet shitless, but seriously, he didn't do anything. He hadn't even said more than ten words to him, for Morrighan's sake!

Pushing the door to the Inn open, the smell of warm pancakes and freshly squeezed orange juice assaulted his senses. Kain wiped away a little bit of drool that had escaped from the corner of his mouth as a bubbly Tieve welcomed him inside with a plate of pancakes and a glass of juice.

Breakfast was a quick and uneventful affair, mostly because he wolfed down the meal as quickly as he could because he was so damn hungry (_and dehydrated, can't forget that too_).

Kain was halfway through licking the plate sparkling clean would've finished were it not for a quick smack of an armored gauntlet against his head. Turning around, he saw Captain Aodhan with a disapproving frown on his face.

"Mornin' Captain." The stare did not lessen in its intensity, and Kain wondered _shit shit what the hell did I do now_?

"You do realize you are supposed to be acting as a role-model for the rookies?"

Well, no shit. That was what he was (mostly) paid to do.

"Yessir."

"Then don't lick the plate like a child." With that, the Captain strode out of the Inn, no doubt to oversee the shift change for the patrol units. Kain stared at the Captain's back and then gave one last lick to the plate he was still holding. He stood up and grabbed his empty juice glass before heading over to the kitchen.

At least his headache had taken a back seat for a moment, with some food in his bellyâ€|

* * *

><p>"Soâ€|" Evie addressed the motley group of individuals that had been squished together into a five-man-team. They had only known each other for the past week, but it was plenty of time for Evie to talk her way into friendship with each and every single one of them. "Anyone knows what we're doing today?"<p>

Lann, from his jittery position next to the shoddily-built campfire on the boat, replied with a simple "Nope," before launching himself again at the duck sign with each swing of his swords, easily amused as it squeaked over and over again.

"No." Karok looked up briefly from his meditation position on top of a large barrel that somehow did not collapse under his weight, but then he lost interest and returned to his thoughts.

Fiona, who was standing next to Evie, sighed as she watched Lann find an endless source of entertainment with the squeaking duck sign. Why was she stuck with these people again? "Whoever that is responsible for our training today was supposed to show up two hours ago."

Kai was over at the mailbox, but he found nothing of importance to him or his comrades so he returned to sitting on the rope railing, balancing expertly with an expression of utter boredom.

Evie turned around and stuck her tongue out at Kai. "What if they forgot about us? We would be stuck here _forever_ until someone did."

"Pffft. Who's sayin' anythin' 'bout forgettin' you bunch'o kids?"

Lann tripped over himself in mid-swing, Fiona drew out her sword, Evie accidentally shot a Magic Arrow out from her staff, Karok startled from his meditation, and Kai fell flat on his back onto the boat dock.

"Where did that voice come from?" There was nobody new, from what Evie could see from her place on the boat, but the voice couldn't have come from nowhereâ€|

"I swear, one day's a dragon's gonna sweep you all into its maw

before you even noticed a thing. Look up, kiddos!" Everyone looked up, and there was a man perched on the railing of crow's nest at the top of the sails. The man wavered drunkenly from the crow's nest a bit before throwing himself off his perch, landing on the floor of the boat in a dramatic crouch.

Their instructor stood up, the tips of his twin swords clinking against the ship's deck, and brushed off some imaginary dust from his shoulders. His disarming smile was obviously strained and his face took on a greenish tinge after a brief moment, in which absolute regret flashed across his face. He staggered off to the side of the boat with his hands clutching at his stomach.

"I prob'ly should've not done that..."

Fiona rolled her eyes in exasperation as she sheathed her sword. He was the one in charge of training them today? The man looked as if he'd just rolled out of bed with a massive hangover; judging by the way he was currently hunched over the railing of the boat vomiting out his breakfast, he most likely was still hungover and in no real condition to teach a group of novice mercenaries.

* * *

><p>Some days later...</p>

"I'd tap that." Gallagher whistled at a female mercenary that passed by the other side of the window from where he was sitting (the wrong way) on a chair. The Outpost was unusually quiet today with most of the veteran mercenaries scurrying around the town to complete endless tasks, so the man had plenty of time to whine to the only person in the room that would bother to listen to the drivel coming out of his mouth every two seconds. "Damn, she's got the booty."

"'Ey, remember what happened last time you tried that on her? And 'fore that? I'm surprised yeh didn't get brain damage." Next to him, Kain chewed idly on a hangnail as he flipped through a recently-written report on increased fomorian activity near the ruins of Ainle.

"Eh, they like it. I'm charming like that." The womanizer abruptly leaned into the other man's personal space and snatched the report from him. "C'mon K, you can slack when the Captain's not around. What's so interesting about this bit anyways? You've been reading the same page for the past five minutes! Let's ditch and do something fun!"

"Shut yer mouth, since I'm the one fixing your stupid spelling mistakes! I don't want the Captain tanning our hides because you misspelled Rocheste five different times!"

Kain had an annoyed look on his face as he grabbed the report back with a resigned sigh and continued reading and marking it up. Gallagher slumped and grabbed a quill to fiddle aimlessly with, not willing to do any work at all but more than willing to persuade his best friend into doing it for him. He'd been expressly ordered by the Captain to park his ass inside the Outpost and get through his neglected stack of mission reports after the tower of papers had nearly buried Ceara when it toppled over yesterday; normally, Gallagher would just sneak out after a while of playing nice and

continue having some fun at the expense of the rookies, but ever since a huge batch of mercenary recruits arrived a week ago, almost all of the veteran Crimson Blade mercenaries had been called in to train the recruits into fighting shape.

Well, all of the veterans except for Gallagher, and with good reason (although Captain Aodhan had refused to elaborate fully whenever anyone asked). It was an unsaid rule within the mercenary company that if Gallagher was going to be sent to sit in the corner like a chastised child, someone mostly-immune to that man's manipulations needed to be assigned there as well to make sure he stayed in the corner like a good boy, and who better than someone who was practically his only friend on the entire continent?

"Um, hello? S-Sirs?" A gangly youngster equipped with the Crimson Blade Youth set and an unbloodied spellsword hooked on her belt hesitantly poked her head into the Outpost. "Iâ€¦ I was told that if I got lost orâ€¦ or needed some help between training sessions, I should go to the Outpost for someone called... Kain?"

"_Really? Thanks a lot, Captain, not like I had anything else to do, no sir._" _Kain muttered and let the mission report fall to the table before gesturing for the recruit to come closer with a genial smile. He stomped hard on Gallagher's foot underneath the table when he could practically feel the beginnings of a leer starting to form on the man's face and put on a welcoming front for the girl. He ignored Gallagher's impudent howl of pain and then rolled his eyes when he heard the heavy thump of a person overdramatically falling backwards onto the floor. "That's me. How can I help you, kiddo?"

* * *

><p>"I hate Gallagher! He's suchâ€¦ such a prick! I just can't deal with him!" Evie looked like as if she was going to burst into tears from where she was sitting by the campfire by the Colhen Docks. To either side of the magician, her two companions exchanged sympathetic looks of understanding and loathing at the name of the man that caused so much trouble for almost every single rookie that enlisted in the Crimson Blade Mercenaries.

Lann tried to console his friend with a semi-awkward pat on her back. "He's a major downer, sure, but if you ignore him, he isn't that ba-

"HE TRIED TO GROPE ME!"

"WAIT WHAT? WHEN?"

"All the time." Fiona had a nonplussed look on her face as she let Evie bawl into her shoulder and patted the poor girl's back, mindful of the wooden staff. "He tries to do that to all of the newer female mercenaries. You haven't noticed?"

"Uhm, wellâ€¦ I guess I was too busy running errands and training to really notice." Lann recalled Gallagher being slapped across the face quite a few times by some of the older and more experienced female mercenaries when he unwillingly crossed paths with him a few times, but he hadn't been aware that harassment had been reason behind it.

Gallagher was, in the simplest of terms, the one man who was able to get on the nerves of every single person in town regardless of their gender with a few well-placed barbs, so it was a relatively normal thing to find the merc in trouble at least once every day.

"I don't even know how he's still an active mercenary!" Evie wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her Crimson Blade-provided tunic and smiled thankfully at Fiona when the other woman provided her with a napkin to sniffle into. "Oh, look, there's the rest of our friends on the next boat! I guess they cleared out the training site without too many problems, either."

"That training site was laughable." Fiona crossed her arms across her chest, an unimpressed look on her face as she watched the figures of Karok, Kai, and Vella trudging down the ship's gangplank looking as if they'd just finished a lovely stroll instead of beating up giant wooden men. "I hope that there's more of a challenge in the next session."

"It definitely was too easy. I wonder who's going to be handling the next stage of our training, though. Hopefully **not** Gallagher." Lann waved at the three other rookies, catching their attention and gesturing them to come over.

"Hello, comrades! It is nice to see all of you again, without injury! I take it that your trial was a success like ours?" Karok gave Lann a high five that nearly sent the other merc toppling off his seat from the force.

"Too easy!" Vella smirked and sat down next to Evie after mischievously shoving Lann off the log to make room for her. "I guess all of us are just that good, heh?"

Kai grunted and took a seat on the log adjacent, which Lann had sat down on as well after grumbling about his mistreatment at the hands of the other dual-sword user. Karok plonked down next to him and the log creaked dangerously under their combined weight, but thankfully did not break.

"What next? Do we wait for someone to get us orâ€|?" Vella crossed her ankles and wiggled her toes at the campfire's warmth seeping through her leather boots.

"I dunno." Lann kicked aside a clod of dirt at Fiona, who shot him a half-hearted glare. "Some food would be great, though."

Evie snapped her fingers, her eyes lighting up. "Might as well! We can go to the Inn and say hi to Tieve, too. This morning, I heard she was making extra pancakes at no cost for rookies!"

"The pancakes are very delicious." Karok nodded in agreement and smiled, his teeth blindingly white against the darkness of his skin. Kai grunted again, probably in agreement as well, although one could never tell with him.

"Let's go, then." Fiona got up first, a barely-there smile on her usually-impassive face.

* * *

><p>"Gallagher! Kain!" Captain Aodhan stormed into the Outpost some hours later, his battered armor smudged with dirt (and the tears of the rookies unlucky enough to have him as their trainer for the day). The much older mercenary looked weary and his stoic face was lined with carefully-masked pain, as he technically was still on light duty after the incident at the Weathered Bell Tower and wasn't supposed to be training recruits for at least another week as per Brynn's instructions. Of course, the Captain had summarily ignored the magician's advice and continued his duties with a level of determined stubbornness that could be found only in those within the upper ranks of the Crimson Blades.

"Captain!" Kain scrambled to his feet and snapped to attention with a crisp salute. An empty inkwell and a stack of dusty books clattered to the floor.

Gallagher remained sitting, a defiantly bored look on his face. "Am I free to go now, Captain? I think I've sat in the naughty corner long enough."

Needless to say, Captain Aodhan did not look pleased. He gave Gallagher a look that made the man's big mouth snap shut close with an audible click.

"Kain, I'm reassigning you to the last group of recruits. They're right outside and next up for the training site. Gallagher, that stack of papers will be finished and on my desk by supper or I will personally chain you to that desk and you will ****never**** leave without informing me beforehand. ****Not even to piss****. I don't want to hear another word out of you until then."

"Understood, Captain." Gallagher pasted on a fake smile, righted his chair, and picked up a quill. He grabbed an unfinished report off the top of the stack and started scribbling furiously, following the chicken-scratch notes that his fellow mercenary had left in the margins.

When the Captain turned his gaze to him, Kain saluted again respectfully, gave Gallagher a companionate thump on the shoulder, and practically ran out of the Outpost. Captain Aodhan disappeared into his office off to the side and the door slammed shut, leaving Gallagher by himself in the main room.

Alone, Gallagher banged his head a few times onto the table and groaned.

* * *

><p>"Alrighty kids, here's how things are done 'round hereâ€"" Enjoyed by the prospect of being outside and actually doing his job as a training instructor instead of being stuck inside a dusty room babysitting Gallagher, Kain herded his group of rookies off to the Docks, where he was supposed to explain the basics of choosing a mission and boarding a boat.<p>

"I'm not a kid!" This squeak came from a tiny waif of a girl that barely reached the middle of his chest in height and held a glaive almost twice as tall in her equally tiny hands.

"Tch, you're like what? 12?" A relatively short and pretty-looking

boy, looking hardly any older than the girl, cocked his head and smirked arrogantly at her. A dagger hovered in the air above his outstretched palm. "What are you going to do with that stick, anyways? It's not even a real weapon!"

"It _so_ is!"

"_Ach_! Get that outta my face before I stab you!"

Kain wondered for a brief moment if the situation really was so desperate that children were now being accepted as front-line soldiers. The merc shared a long-suffering look with the other two members of the group, a muscular man lugging around a greatsword and a woman (definitely a _woman, heh_) with a spellword in one hand and a magical focusing orb in the other.

"As I was saying," Kain decided to let the kids get their nerves out on each other, since it was quite obvious that behind the bravado, the two were among the youngest people to ever voluntarily join the Crimson Blades and probably felt the pressure to perform better than the others. "Before anythin', you're gonna have to pick a mission from this board here and show it to the dock master over there."

He pointed at a cat sitting on top of a barrel to the side of the dungeon board. Next to the yawning white cat was a pile of mission tickets stamped with red paw prints.

The four rookies stared at him as if he was insane (_which was debatable_).

"Yeah, uh... don't question it, if you want to catch a boat on time. No need to speak to her either, just set the ticket down and get it stamped. Then, all yeh gotta do is board a boat. There's usually a handful of empty ones always docked, so just hop on any one of them and tell the helmsman your location. If there's no boat, you're just gonna have to wait. Luckily, there's one right here waiting fo' us. Anyone want to do the honors?"

"I will!" The glaive girl marched up to the mission board and grabbed the ticket for the training site.

The boy harrumphed, as if he wanted to lead the group. Too bad for him. Kain rolled his eyes and then gave an apologetic shrug when the two much older rookies gave him pained looks that were practically begging him to kick the squabbling children out of their mismatched party.

The dock master meowed impatiently and hissed at the boy with the dagger when he started riling up the glaive girl again, this time over who would get to board the boat first. Kain shot a silent prayer to Morrighan and hoped that he wouldn't get stabbed in the stomach with the sharp end of a spear by the rookiesâ€¦ again. He could only afford so many potions from the Marketplace before he'd have to start taking the more raids on his days off to make up for the loss in gold.

* * *

><p>An irritable Gallagher was painstakingly half-way through the stack of paperwork when three veteran mercenaries â€" the ones that

had been with the company for longer than he had, actually â€" strolled into the Outpost with some bottles of contraband spiced rum in their alcohol-lax grips.<p>

"Oi, look, Gally's doin' paperwork!"

"I dinnae know 'e could read! Hah!"

They were drunk. The Captain would have a field day with making an example of them, if he wasn't cooped up in his office nursing a horrendous migraine. From where he was sitting, Gallagher showed them his middle finger and skimmed the next paragraph on a report he'd written a few weeks ago on the troop movements of yetis in the Hoarfrost Depths. He grudgingly scratched out **ackuiyr** and penned in **acquire**, as the scrawled note in the margin suggested â€" honestly, it wasn't his own damned fault that he'd never really learned to read and write properly.

The mercenaries staggered a few foot closer, one of them almost toppling over his own two feet, but didn't quite make it to the desks.

"Where's (hic) the, the wifey, Gally? Y'stick 'im somewhere?"

"I'd like t'stick sommat else in, if y'know meh!"

"Shut yer mouths!" Gallagher's frown turned into a sneer at the uproarious drunken laughter interspersed with hiccups. The three mercs were always on his tail, talking garbage behind his best friend's back like he was trash, and he hated the fact that the sleazeballs outranked him so much that handing them a much-deserved beatdown was out of the question even by Gallagher's (very poor) sense of self-preservation.

The drunk merc continued, egged on by the laughter of his equally drunk friends. "Ay, ay, diddae finally (hic) leave (hic) your scrawny ass behind? 'Cuz I wonnor if 'ey like th' taste offa real man, yeah? Skulkin' 'round you, nevar getting' any, can't see why th'man even keeps comin' around. I wonnot mind a piece of that ass!"

The mercenary made a crude gesture down south and Gallagher recoiled in absolute disgust. They thought that heâ€| and his best friend wereâ€| When did he ever give the impression of that? He wasn'tâ€| he wasn't one of those men! And he was sure as hell that Kain wasn't one either! Just thinking of it sent waves of revulsion coursing through his veins.

Gallagher shot out of his chair and slammed his fist on the table, sending papers flying and other miscellaneous desk items falling off the desk. Before he could shout out his angry frustrations at them, the door to the Captain's office slammed open and the man himself stormed out with a livid expression and a dangerously pulsing vein on his face.

The drunk mercenaries promptly sobered up as much as they could, but it didn't help them much as one of them teetered and fell flat on his face with a resounding smack.

"YOU THREE!" The Captain bellowed, and for once it wasn't being aimed at Gallagher. "WHAT HAVE I SAID ABOUT PUBLIC INTOXICATION! Report here at dusk, as you three will be taking over sentry duty for the next two rotations! In addition, you will NOT be paid for those hours AND for the rest of the week!"

The mercs slurred their weak affirmatives the best they could, scared into meek cowards, and stumbled away towards the barracks to begin the laborious process scurrying away with their tails between their legs without throwing up along the way.

"I want those reports soon, Gallagher." The Captain turned to Gallagher with something like pity in his gaze for a brief second before storming back into his office, muttering inaudibly about changing regulations and latrine duty.

Gallagher picked up the papers that had fallen off the desk and started writing again, the unbridled fury coiled in his gut giving him the energy to actually do the paperwork seeing as it had nowhere else to go.

* * *

><p>It was late when the four rookies and one veteran mercenary returned to Colhen. The Docks, crowded the bodies of numerous mercenaries returning victorious from far-off lands and some wrapped in white shrouds, were outlined with the beautiful backdrop of a golden-red sunset and the softly-lapping waves of the ocean.<p>

For Kain, this group of rookies didn't seem too bad, judging from how easily they'd handled the training site. Even with the constant bickering between the two youngest rookies, they had worked well together long enough to let the other members of the group take on the wooden boss at the end of the dungeon without breaking a sweat. He hadn't even needed to draw his swords when the glaive girl had somehow gotten stuck underneath the wooden boss, as a hulking greatsword had ended up sending the creature flying a good few feet away from the force.

"Well, that's it for today, so go on and get some dinner at the Inn. I'll take care of the post-mission report, seeing as all of you will start learning how to write those tomorrow with Ceara." Kain grinned when both the dagger boy and glaive girl, Sylas and Lynn, simultaneously groaned at the mention of boring paperwork. When they realized they'd agreed on something, the two went right back to squabbling and bickering as if they were half their actual ages.

"Hey, thanks again for the run-around. Y'made things easier to find, definitely." Hurk, the greatsword-wielder, exchanged a strong and enthusiastic handshake with Kain.

Arisha, the one with her spellsword clipped to her belt, smiled coquettishly. "I don't suppose you'd like to join us for dinner?"

"Nah, you don't want a crusty ol' merc like me around when yer talkin' with the other rookies. I'll be off now, don't have too much fun, yeah?" Kain scratched the back of his neck with a sheepish look before waving the rookies off towards the Inn. He watched the

four rookies amble towards the brightly lit beacon that was Colhen's Inn. No doubt Tieve, Fenella, and Aislinn had cooked up a storm to give the newly-inducted Crimson Blade rookies a warm welcome after a long day of hard work.

The windows of the Outpost were lit with candles and lanterns despite being well into the dinner hour. Kain decided to head over there to see if Gallagher actually listened to the Captain for once and finished the reports.

Surprise, surprise: the main room of the Outpost was empty save for Gallagher muttering under his breath as his hand dragged a quill across a page at a speed faster than he'd ever done in his life. The stack of reports was no longer a teetering tower, but instead organized into a few neat piles of papers marked with official stamps of completion.

Kain blinked.

Gallagher had finished his paperwork.

Gallagher, of all the people, finished his paperwork.

"Damn, G, I can't believe yeh actually did it."

Gallagher startled, caught off guard with how intensely he had been squinting and muttering at the piece of paper in front of him, and then swore when he realized he left an indelible ink smear on the report he was writing on.

"Piss off."

"I thought you'd skip out the minute I left." Kain sauntered over with a grin. The man leaned his hip against the desk and crossed his arms across his chest. "The Captain didn't really chain you to the desk, did he?"

Gallagher scowled as he shoved off the report he'd just finished onto one of the piles and picked up yet another one. A data analysis on the movements of Fomorian troops in the Hoarfrost Depths. Fun. "Go 'way, I've gotta finish this 'fore the Captain comes back."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day when ol' Gally willingly skips supper fo' paperwork. C'mon you big lug, let's go eat, I'm starvin'."

Kain reached over to take the report away from Gallagher, only to have the other man viciously slap his arm away with a vexed scowl. He'd never had that look directed in his direction before.

"Oi! That hurt!" It didn't really, but now Kain was worried. Something had momentous must have happened between the few hours that he'd left the Outpost and his return to make his best friend act like a snarling loon, and he had to figure out what.

"Shove off, then!" Gallagher resolutely refused to look in Kain's direction as he stabbed his quill into the report rather harshly, his messy scrawl nearly tearing the parchment in half from the force.

Silence, save for the scratching of nib against paper.

Kain took in a deep breath, exhaled with a sort of patience that one could only learn by dealing with an obstinate mercenary's strange mood swings for several years, and then dropped down onto one of the chairs in front of the desk, sitting on it backwards with his arms casually wrapped around the back.

"Who's done you wrong now, G? We'll go an' give 'em the ol' one-two. That'll shut 'em up good."

Gallagher ignored him and shuffled some papers off to the side.

"C'mon, don't do this. I can't do anythin' if y'don't tell me."

No response.

"_Gallagher_." Kain reserved his serious usage of the other mercenary's for only the most dire of circumstances, and this seemed appropriate. He'd _never_ been shut out of his best friend's personal space before, and the cold shoulder that Gallagher was perfecting was starting to hurt (in an abstract feeling sort of way that Kain would never admit out loud).

Despite being a veteran mercenary, Kain flinched when the man suddenly slammed his quill down on the tabletop, knocking over a (thankfully empty) ink pot and a few dusty tomes. The look that Gallagher, having sprang up from his seat to loom menacingly over him, sent in Kain's direction was starkly foreign â€" he'd never seen that particular expression on the man's face before, and seemed like a mixture of petulant bitterness, hatred, and self-loathing all rolled into one.

"What part of _fucking leave me alone_ do you not understand! You're always pokin' an' pokin' and sometimes I just wanna knock a coup'la teeth outta ya so you'd _shut up_ for once! It's like you're _fuckin'_ attached to my ass_ like some kinda fruity bastard, for Goddess's sake!"

It took a few moments of silence, with Gallagher's heaving breaths overly loud in the room, until Kain was able to snap his hanging jaw shut as he shot up from his seat. One of his eyes twitched as he curled his fingers into the fabric of his trousers in an attempt to stop himself from giving into the urge to slam his fists into Gallagher's infuriating face.

"'Ey! I don't know what's gotten inâ€"

"Oh, fer fuck's sake, after all the humiliation I've sat through today, don't tell me I've got yer feelings all hurt like some kinda limp-wristed moâ€"

"Oi, shut yer mouth!"

"Or what? Yer gonna _make_ me?"

Kain acted on impulse and reared forward, butting his head against the other man's thick skull. Gallagher's nose crunched with an ugly noise upon impact. When the other man took a step back and then sat

back down, pinching at the bridge of his bloodied nose with a grimace, Kain felt the heat of his anger instantly cool down into an icy twist of shame that clawed at his guts.

If he were anyone else in this town he would've found absolute joy in headbutting Gallagher, but the only thing running through Kain's mind was _what a fuckin' mess this was turning out to be._

"Shit, G," Kain exhaled slowly and rounded the desk. He searched the pockets of his trousers in the hopes of finding a clean square of cloth, and luckily he did find one that was crumpled and not too dirty. Kain held the wadded-up cloth to Gallagher, who hesitated for a moment before resignedly taking it and pressing it onto his nose. "Y'might wanna lean forward a bit and keep the pressure on."

Gallagher grunted as he slouched forward until his forehead was resting against the edge of the desk. Kain leaned against the desk next to the man, crossing his arms across his chest uncertainly before giving up and setting one apologetic hand on Gallagher's shoulder.

The shoulder immediately tensed, and Kain let his hand slip off.

After several minutes of silence Gallagher was the first to speak, although uncharacteristically haltingly and without a trace of mockery in his tone.

"Bran, Miles, and Gil stopped by a while after ya left for the rookies. Said som' stuff, got me worked up, and I then couldn't just up and leave or the Cap would've scalped me. Y'know how it is."

Kain hummed an affirmative. The three senior mercenaries tended to be even worse troublemakers than Gallagher was, but often were sent on long and difficult missions so they usually weren't in town long enough to cause too much of a fuss "and even then, the results of those three's antics ended up with fingers pointed squarely at Gallagher's direction (since being a crass nuisance to pretty much everyone in town didn't quite lend a desire to find the actual culprits when there was a picture-perfect scapegoat to place the blame on, after all).

"Some of the things they said" got me thinkin' a bit. Had nothin' else to do, I guess." Gallagher raised his head up high enough so that he could give Kain a weary side-glance.

"Y'could've just said that at the start, yeah?" Kain crossed his arms again. He had a feeling that he wasn't quite going to like where this conversation was going.

"Just" Gallagher exhaled slowly and pinched harder at the bridge of his nose. "Are you only followin' me around 'cause you like me?"

Kain raised an eyebrow. "Really? That got you all worked up? Y'think I'm stupid or som'?"

"Not like that." Gallagher thumped his head back onto the tabletop and winced.

Kain opened his mouth and then closed it when he realized what exactly Gallagher was insinuating in his special, emotionally-retarded way.

"Iâ€¦ wellâ€¦"

Gallagher raised his head up again, his eyes widening when he realized what Kain's hesitance meant. With panic crawling down his spine, Kain grasped for some words that would make this moment less awkward, but couldn't find any. He blurted out the first honest thing that made the most sense in his head.

"Of course I like yeh, dumbass. Yer my best friend for Morrighan's sake. You've always been, even from all th'way back in training camp when I clocked you good 'cross the face for the first time 'cause you'd gotten both of us on the Captain's shit-list fo' sneakin' into the ladies' rooms of the barracks. I still haven't forgiven you for that, y'know. I still have nightmares of those three weeks, diggin' endless field latrines next to the mouthiest _and_ chubbiest rookie with that had this Goddess-awful stupidest haircut I'd _ever_ seen in my life."

Gallagher let out a dry chortle. Kain huffed out a slow breath when he remembered exactly how much trouble they'd stirred up back when they both had been little more than two lonely, displaced orphans reaching out for the faintest threads of friendship, and the War had seemed like a distant danger that had yet to reach their doorsteps and crush their childish dreams of glory underfoot.

"And thenâ€¦ somewhere along the line, we got older and I just ended upâ€¦ liking yeh a bit more thanâ€¦ y'know."

There. He said it: more than a decade's worth of repression muttered out nonchalantly, as if he'd never lost so many months of sleep agonizing over how his best friend would react (_if he ever did willingly say anything at all_).

One of Gallagher's hands, with ragged cuticles covered in smears of dried blood, went up to scrub hard at his hair â€" an old nervous tic that Kain hadn't seen in quite some years.

"That long, huhâ€¦"

"Now yeh know." Kain turned to look out of the nearest window of the Outpost.

Another long moment of silence stretched between them.

"Iâ€¦ can't. I'm notâ€¦"

Kain shifted his weight from foot to foot before pushing himself off the desk, a stoic expression pasted firmly onto his face as he headed for the door. "Well, I'm off. Don't forget t'eat soon, Gallagher."

Gallagher simply stared at the quickly retreating back of his (_ex?_) best friend until the man disappeared from sight with the closing of the Outpost's front door.

* * *

><p>Two painfully slow weeks passed until Gallagher had been able to corner Kain just right at the tail end of the afternoon patrol shift change. It had been obvious that the other mercenary was actively avoiding him, volunteering to take up the bulk of the rookies' training sessions starting at dawn and filling up his time with other missions and raids back-to-back until the very late hours into the night where he could sneak into the barracks with none the wiser.<p>

Those two weeks without Kain's constant presence by his side sent Gallagher frustratingly off-kilter, and every time he tried to catch a boat to go on a mission it would feel as if he was missing something essential, like an annoying phantom limb. It was only then that Gallagher realized just how much time the other mercenary had willingly and voluntarily spent his time with him, always one step away to his left and ready to deal with whatever troubles they'd find themselves in. The townsfolk, mercenaries, and soldiers in Colhen and Rocheste barely tolerated Gallagher at best, but Kainâ€| that man was his friend and genuinely liked his company for no other reason than just because.

Now? Gallagher figured that he'd pretty much screwed everything up so badly at some point that even his best friend didn't seem inclined to talk to him except whenever it was completely and utterly unavoidable. He figured that a shiny jewel, a pouch of coins, or an expensive ring weren't going to do him any favors this time around, either.

"Gallagher, look, I know yeh want to talk but I've got a spot on the only boat headin' fo' the Spider Queen today an' I can't afford to miss this one 'cause the Captain would tan m'hide. It's leavin' in half an hour and I gotta get my gear ready."

"Oh no, you're not goin' anywhere 'til you hear what I gotta say. Ain't nobody ever stonewall me before, and you're damn well not going to be the first." Gallagher blocked the doorway of Kain's room in the veterans' barracks. When Kain saw that Gallagher wasn't going to move no matter how hard he shoved at the obstinate mercenary, he sighed in acknowledgment of his defeat and sat down on the edge of his cot.

"Better make it quick, then."

Gallagher shut the door behind him and locked it. Kain raised an eyebrow.

"What's it going to take for you to be my best friend again?"

Kain's mouth opened, closed, and then opened again. "â€|Yer tryin' to bribe me? Are yeh kiddin' me?"

"I'm serious!" Gallagher scowled and scrubbed at his hair harshly. "Don't you fuckin' laugh, but what's it going to take?"

"â€|I just need som' time. Toâ€| to get over m'self." Kain ran his hands over his scarred face, undoubtedly tired of everything Gallagher-related at the moment. "Yeh said that you can't like me back in that way, soâ€| don't worry 'bout me, Gally. I'll never

stop being your best friend, butâ€|"

Gallagher's hands went down to curl into fists at his side. "You're not even givin' me a damn chance! You know how much I **hate** that!"

"Itâ€| it doesn't work that way. Y'don't just change yourself overnight. You of all people know that." Kain sighed.

"But I want my only fuckin' friend back, that's gotta count for something, right?"

"â€|Som'times, yeh don't make much sense, y'know?" Kain got up and wiped his hands on his trousers. "D'you want me back as a friend? Or as a buddy? What d'you want? 'Cause I know what I want, and I know that it damn well isn't gonna happen. You like women and always have, so git yer shit together, Gallagher."

"I want to try." Gallagher swallowed past the lump in his throat? Was he really willing to do this to get back normalcy in his life?

He'd spent two weeks running that question over and over again in his head.

But, Goddess damn it, he was â€" and only giving enough of a damn to do it for the one man who'd stuck by his side for more than a decade. He couldn't envision himself willingly doing this with any other person, not even with any of his fleeting one-nighters of numerous women over the years.

"You like women, Gallagher." Kain looked lost, as if the world had tugged the rug from underneath his feet too many times. His reached down for his traveling backpack.

"That doesn't mean I don't like **you **too!"

Kain ran his hand over his face again and made to escape through the door. "I can't deal wit' this right now, I hav'ta go. The boat's waitin'. 'M sorry, G."

Gallagher stood his ground and pushed Kain off-balance so that he could grab hold on the other man's chestplate and slam him back up against the wall. He leaned in close to the other man's face, his expression angry but deadly serious.

"I want my best friend back, even if that means I'm gonna have to be your goddamned boyfriend."

Kain huffed out a hysterical giggle. What has his life gone to? He'd been rejected, but now propositioned? Did Gallagher really change his mind (unlikely), or was he just being desperate for some company that didn't outright hate his guts (the more probable reason)?

"Are yehâ€| sure? 'Cause if you do this, it's gonna be a hell of a lot harder to get me back if you decide that y'can't handle it a few days down the line."

"Yeah, I'm sure. What do I have to do?"

"Y'might wanna let go of me, fo' one." Kain glanced down at where Gallagher had curled his fingers into the straps of his armor.

Gallagher let go and took a half-step back.

"Now, I'm just 'bout to be fashionably late for my boat, so we'll talk more when I get back, alright G? This is too impor'ant to finish in a quick pre-mission chat."

"But, we'reâ€¦ good?" Gallagher held his breath.

"Yeah, we'reâ€¦ all good." Kain exhaled slowly, a small smile twitching at his lips as he unlocked the door to his room. "Don't have too much fun wit'out me, 'kay?"

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

"Aren't Iâ€¦ I dunno, supposed toâ€¦ giv' you a kiss or somethin' 'fore you leave?" At the word kiss, Gallagher's mouth twisted into an odd half-frown as he remembered what his parents used to do before they'd up and died on him and left him to fend for himself in Colhen. Did two hard-assed men do schmoopy things like that?

"Nah, don't worry 'bout it." Knowing the expression currently on Gallagher's face, Kain shook his head. The other man would need some more time to come to terms with what he'd just agreed to. As he left the room, he waved a casual goodbye over his shoulder.

"Seeya when I get back, G."

"Yeahâ€¦" Gallagher watched his best friend walk away from him, instead of with him, for the second time in his life. Despite the weight on his shoulders being lifted slightly, he still felt an uncomfortable stabbing of nerves in his guts.

* * *

><p>One week laterâ€¦_

The boat that was supposed to dock for the return of the Spider Queen party was late by two days.

Gallagher spent those two days feeling particularly irritable and spent extra effort in terrorizing the people of Colhen, covering up the sinking feelings in his stomach with harsher-than-usual barbs and taunts towards the rookies and upping his perverted-jerkass-flirting games with any female mercenaries within a five-foot radius. During every moment he could spare in-between being yelled at by the Captain, scolded by Ceara, or shoved off of his chair by Marrec for being a general nuisance, he stopped by the docks and searched fruitlessly for the creaky old ship that had carried his best friend away to fight giant spiders for some reason or another.

It was only on this particular day, by late afternoon, that the damn boat finally anchored at the docks.

Four blood-splattered white shrouds carried on top of makeshift stretchers slowly moved down the gangplank.

Kain was not among any of the pallbearers, nor a part of the severely injured mercenaries limping or being half-carried down onto the docks.

The last one off the ship was a mercenary wrapped head to toe in gauze and bandages " Bran, Gallagher realized " and was missing a leg. The merc was being painstakingly hauled along another grim-faced mercenary, but before he could pass Gallagher the man staggered to a stop and hacked out a mouthful of blood onto the dirt.

"H-h-here." Bran struggled to hand over a pair of bloodied swords wrapped in a tattered square of stained auburn fabric. "H-he p-push'd m-me out th'way"

Gallagher took the swords and felt every nerve in his body turn to ice when he belatedly realized that the only reason why he was holding onto _this_ pair of swords was if Kain hadn't come back _alive_.

The mercenary holding Bran up shifted the weight on his shoulders and muttered his condolences under the weight of Gallagher's uncomprehending stare as he hauled the wounded merc away.

Numb, Gallagher pushed and shoved his way past the crowd of injured and returning mercenaries. Within the hour, the five fallen mercenaries would be given their last rites by Tieve and have their names recorded in the Crimson Blade's Death Book before being cremated and buried in the Temple's graveyard. Such was the way of life and death, as a mercenary.

He had to make sure that it wasn't a trick; he had to see with his own goddamned eyes that his best friend was dead and gone. He wasn't going to believe a damn word anyone said until he saw the body.

Gallagher barged into the Inn and was promptly yanked aside by Tieve (who knew this waif of a girl had so much power in her arms). The man was about to start demanding that she let him go when he registered the profoundly anguished look on Tieve's face.

"Please"

That one, softly whispered word was enough to knock out the air in Gallagher's lungs. He all-but collapsed into a chair that Tieve guided him gently into. The human blood and fomorian ichor dripping from the swords he was clutching in a white-knuckled grip smeared messily onto his palms, his clothes, his _skin_

Deep down, he knew that he didn't need to see anything to know that his one tenuous connection to a grayed morality had been severed.

The man-sized space to his left would never be filled up again with hoarse laughter in response to his crass jokes, or companionate slaps and thumps on the shoulder after a mission-done-well. There would never be another pair of swords that he trusted implicitly to protect

his left flank during the glorious heat of battle.

Suddenly feeling a rush of anger, Gallagher shoved Tieve away and stormed out of the Inn. He shoved and snarled his way through mourning and injured mercs, ignoring Tieve's tearful cries as he headed out towards the path leading out of town to Rocheste.

He needed a drink, _badly_.

* * *

><p>Gallagher did not show up at the funeral service held at the Temple the next day. No one knew where the man had scampered off to after leaving for Rocheste, as he hadn't returned to his room in the barracks or at the Inn when dawn approached.<p>

If anyone asked, however, the single sword that had settled into the ground next to the grave that had appeared sometime during the night was ample evidence that Gallagher did have some semblance of a heart.

* * *

><p>One month laterâ€|_

Captain Aodhan ran his hands through his slightly-graying hair as he pushed open the unlocked door to Kain's room, entered, and closed the door behind him. He understood grief and regret all-too-well, but when it came to matters of the soul—his only solution for easing that ache was to throw himself back into the battlefield and use the anger to slaughter as many fomors as possible before dying. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was only one he knew that worked for those who had suffered through personal losses in this endless and merciless crusade against the fomors.

Empty bottles of alcohol littered the floor, forming a crude path to the man curled up pathetically on a cot that did not belong to him.

"Gallagher, get up."

One hand shakily went up to flip Captain Aodhan off, while the other raised a half-empty bottle of alcohol to his lips.

"As your Captain, I demand that you get up right now,
Gallagher."

Gallagher slumped into a pitiful mess on the floor before staggered up to his feet. The man's heavy stubble, alcohol-stained uniform, tangled hair, and the deep bags underneath his blank eyes made him look no better than a drowned gutter rat.

Captain Aodhan hated that he had to do this, but he had no choice. He put on an expression of extreme disappointment and steeled his voice.

"He wouldn't have wanted you to drink yourself into an early grave, Gallagher. You will be ready for tomorrow's morning shift at the Outpost without so much as a drop of alcohol on yourself, or you can consider yourself discharged from duty. Do you understand?"

"â€|Yes, Captain." Gallagher flinched as his fingers curled around the unmarked bottle in his hands.

"Good." Captain Aodhan swept his gaze around the room that had belonged to a dead man. "Get yourself and this room cleaned up."

"Yes, sir." Gallagher continued staring unsteadily down at his feet.

After another moment, Captain Aodhan sighed. Despite his stern and severe exterior, he wasn't a heartless bastard.

"I'll allow this, just this once. You can either move your belongings into this room, or take his things over to yours. The emptied room will be given to another veteran."

Gallagher looked up at the Captain with an expression that wasn't pure blankness for the first time in a month.

"I'll... I'll take his room."

"Very well. Get it done by tonight." Captain Aodhan gave Gallagher one last _look_, hoping that he got some sense through the man's thick skull, before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

Alone once again, Gallagher gave the room a long look, as if finally realizing what state he'd turned it into during his episodes of mindless grief and drunkenness. He set down the half-empty bottle he was holding onto the nightstand with a soft _clink!_ of glass against wood.

Then, he got down to his knees and picked up the first empty beer bottle within reach.

* * *

><p>Several months laterâ€|_

"Hey rookie, wanna make some dough? It ain't hard, in fact, it'll be a cinch."

Lann turned to Gallagher, who gestured for the merc to come closer. The dual-wielder tried not to frown when he noticed that the older mercenary looked much more haggard and exhausted since the last time they'd spoken, but said nothing as he wandered over.

"Alright. Y'got any spider webs? The special kind?" Gallagher casually leaned against the wall of the Outpost, one hand resting absently against the hilt of the mismatched sword strapped to his left side. "You know what I mean, yeah?"

"Yeah. Striped ones, right?" Lann shrugged.

"Relax, don't worry so much. Just get me the spider webs and I'll take care of the rest. Black, gold, and white. Four each, and I'll give you a cut from the market. Any ol' rookie can handle that, but I'm tellin' you to do it, so hurry up and grab me those webs!"

"Sure." Lann shrugged again. Something like this would only take a few hours of his time and he'd get a good cut from the mission rewards anyways, so an extra bit of pocket gold from Gallagher's odd request didn't seem too bad.

When Lann returned with enough spider webs to fill up the Inn's neglected attic space, Gallagher practically snatched the webs from him and dumped a heavy pouch of gold into his hands. How generous â€" the older mercenary was usually very stingy about handing out gold as his reward, but with how distracted he seemed Lann took opportunity to run off before Gallagher could realize that he'd just handed out a day's worth of money for a few hours of work.

Once the younger mercenary had scurried away, Gallagher packed the spider webs into a small paper parcel and tucked it into the pocket of his trousers. He left the Outpost quietly, taking the less-used paths through Colhen until he'd left the town entirely and headed in the direction of the Temple that was on the road to Rocheste.

The Temple was empty save for Tieve, who had just finished her morning prayers and was just about to leave. The young woman gave Gallagher a sad smile, knowing exactly why he was here, and for once he kept his mouth shut and nodded curtly as she passed by him. He made his way through the winding graveyard until he reached a small and unassuming headstone that was only slightly weathered by the elements underneath a willow tree. A single sword stabbed upright half-way through the ground marked it as the grave of a mercenary killed in action, just like the innumerable other graves in this graveyard.

Gallagher took out the parcel and crouched down to place it on a cleared patch of dirt right next to the headstone. He took out a match, struck it, and dropped it onto the parcel. The paper wrapping burned easily, followed by the spider webs as the gleaming silky-spun threads blackened and curled before crumbling into brittle ashes and dust.

As he watched the flames consume the meagre tribute he had placed down, Gallagher smiled humorlessly as he rested his hand on the hilt of the sword buckled to the left side of his belt â€" a polished twin of the one dug point-first into the ground in front of him.

"I'll be back tomorrow, K."

2. Addendum

****_Twenty years prior..._****

"Stop movin' around! I can't move th'latch if you're wobblin'!"

"It's not m'fault that yer butt weighs like 500 stones, fatty!"

"Shut up! I'm almost there, just a bit moreâ€"

"Why'm I the one on the bottom 'nyways? Shouldn't I be standin' on yer shoulders, since yer bigger than me?"

"Well, I'm the only one that knows how to unlock the damn thing!"

If anyone were paying attention, the humorous sight of two eight-year-old boys in patchwork Crimson Blade uniforms (_a scrawny one with haphazardly chopped tufts of brown hair and amber eyes, while the other was rotund with excess baby fat and had an awful bowl cut that could've only been done by an angry woman's hands_) struggling to unlatch the small window above the back door into the women's mercenary barracks would've been a sight to see.

As it was, the scrawnier one was holding up the bigger boy on his shoulders and was clearly straining underneath the weight.

"Almostâ€|. almostâ€|"

"Hurry up! I can'tâ€"

"AND WHAT DO YOU BOYS THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"

The scrawnier boy jumped at the shout and sent both of them crashing back to the ground. The bigger boy was unlucky enough to slam his face into the door handle on the way down, losing one of his front baby teeth in the process.

Behind them, a twenty-something and newly-promoted Captain Aodhan stood with his arms crossed against his chest and an exasperated glare that he saved for only these two particularly troublesome imps.

"Uhmâ€|"

"We were justâ€|"

The two boys got to their feet and shuffled a bit to look slightly guilty. The bigger kid glanced at the other one for a brief second before turning tail and taking off at a speed that probably shouldn't have been possible for a child who was that fat.

The scrawnier kid followed right on the other boy's heels, laughing as they almost tripped and crashed into some inattentive mercenaries that were just leaving the Inn. The curious heads of four other children â€" one with black hair slicked back into a remarkably mature style, another with long and soft blonde locks, one more with groomed maroon strands tied back into a ponytail, and the last with flaming red hair crammed underneath a hat â€" popped out from behind an open window of the Inn to watch the two boys run straight for the general store.

"YOU'LL NEVER TAKE US ALIVE!"

"NEVERRR!"

* * *

><p>Captain Aodhan ran his hand across his face, thanked the Goddess that he and his wife had been blessed with two young daughters, and then followed after the screaming boys at a leisurely pace. This marked the third time he'd found Gallagher and Kain trying to sneak

into the women's barracks, and he had yet to find an appropriate punishment to give to two obstinate eight-year-old orphans that would make the lesson stick.

More weapons training? Those kids were already almost too swing-happy with their ridiculous wooden swords.

Kitchen duty? They'd just squirrel food away for later, those little shits.

In the distance, Captain Aodhan saw two mercenaries on patrol around the edge of town haul up the wriggling boys over their shoulders as if they were little more than bags of flour. With the volume of the goblin-like shrieking the two were emitting, it was a miracle that everyone in town hadn't gone deaf yet.

"Sir!" The two mercenaries jogged over to where he was standing, and both had wicked grins on their faces as tiny fists and feet beat ineffectively against their chestplates. "We have the culprits of the peeping attempts in custody. What should we do with them?"

Captain Aodhan had an idea suddenly bloom in his mind â€" the one task that every mercenary absolutely hated, but it was a necessary evil.

"Send them out to the Perilous Ruins, I'm having them dig field latrines for a week or so. If I feel they've learnt their lesson, I'll let them come back." Captain Aodhan frowned seriously at the two wide-eyed and gaping boys. "You two want to be Crimson Blades that badly? Well, here's your first assignment and punishment, all rolled into one neat package."

The boys looked at each other for a moment before turning back to Captain Aodhan and opening their mouths in unison.

"It's all his faultâ€" "

"Nuh uh, it's all Gally's ideaâ€" "

"He made me dâ€" "

"I didn't want tâ€" "

Captain Aodhan waved at the two smirking mercenaries in casual dismissal and headed for the Inn, since he felt that could use a drink right about now. The two mercs saluted the best they could while holding two wriggling kids and marched off, deaf to their wailing shouts.

End
file.